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MAIDENS AND MATRONS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY.

BY MRS. BURTON HARRISON, AUTHOR OF "THE ANGLOMANIACS."

FLOATING about the drawing-rooms of the old *régime* in Richmond is the tradition of a travelled young Southerner who, goaded by the spur of political conscience, lent to the Confederate capital the light of his presence during several years of the war. When asked, upon first arriving, what part he meant to play in aiding to shape the new order of things for the would-be independent South, his reply was : "I haven't quite made up my mind ; but I think it probable I shall put down quadrilles, teach the girls their proper place, and bring the young married women out."

In spite of the best efforts of reform, the artless conditions of society in which a woman once married, however beautiful or young or clever, is pushed to the wall like the heavy furniture when a dance is under way, have not yet been banished from our land. The more remote members of the struggling young family of sixty-odd millions, shown by the census to be assembled under our national roof-tree, still believe in early maturity, are dazzled by superficial brightness, and refuse to hear themselves denounced from dictating centres as beneath the yoke of a barbaric cult. That we, at the corner-stone of the commonwealth, are in full practice of the conventionalities of older civilizations, where matrons of all ages have their due share of the honors and influence and responsibilities of social interchange, our far-away brethren are only just beginning to find out. In this respect they are fairly on a par with the travellers and writers of other countries who, when at a canter across our continent, pause for a moment to stare at some trait or custom of a raw settlement recently reclaimed from virgin wilderness, to cry, "Oh !" and

"Can these things be?" and to assure their hearers or readers that with such leaven Americans are leavened in the lump.

No feature of our sociology is more fruitful in flippant comment than the national attitude toward the young girl alleged by such critics to be the actual disposer of our social destinies. It has proved useless to suggest to commentators upon our body social that a distinction must be drawn between the refined daughter of a cultivated home, hedged in from birth with every nicety of influence and education, and the bogie of modern novels and essays who is accepted as our "type." To the enthusiasts who yearly undertake to condense America into paragraphs, or expand it into chapters, it makes very little difference where they place the caricature their souls delight in. One of the latest specimens of this sort of writing is to be found in the pages of "*Les Américains Chez Eux*," a publication from the pen of the Marquise de San Carlos. After describing the *vie intime* of a New York family of wealth, the members of which, "arising at seven o'clock, *the hour of going to bed the night before*," consume a breakfast of "bleeding meats, tea, coffee, warm heavy pastry called hot rolls, and iced water," then scatter, the men to business, the women to spend the day in shopping, for the pleasure of "carrying parcels home through the street," or at numerous "receptions,"—with an account of the dinner, eaten in silence and followed by an exhibition of the master of the house sitting, absorbed in thoughts of his affairs, with his heels on the mantelpiece until it is time to go to his "agitated sleep,"—the author gives us the following impressions of a representative American maiden :

"The code of convenances, as we understand it in Europe, exists nowhere in the United States. . . . As soon as a young girl is declared to be 'out,' she does absolutely all that comes into her head. Her first care is to have a reception day different from that of her mother. . . . Mademoiselle also receives alone in the evening, and her mother is careful to avoid checking by her presence '*les expansions de la jeunesse*.' . . . Without losing her innocence, she leads the life of a rushing young widow. . . . If this young person cannot find a husband for herself, she remains an old maid. . . . Traditions and the fruits of experience having in general no existence in the United States, one finds in the education of their children strange misconceptions of propriety. For instance, Mlle. ——, the most modest of young girls, gives an evening party, and reproduces, for the amusement of her friends and the occupants of the boarding-house in which she lives, the poses of the most remarkable statues of European museums."

Another specimen of free-handed criticism is from the recent letter of a German gentleman of good education to a friend :

"*In the United States* callers in the evening are received by the young lady of the family, seated in the 'parlor' in her rocking-chair, after her father and mother

have retired up stairs ; she is very agreeable and entirely at ease ; if one remains till ten o'clock, when the rest of the house is wrapped in slumber, he will be asked, before leaving, to turn out the gas in the hall, and his young hostess will, with her own fair hand, put up the night-latch when he goes."

Such generalizing is part of the penalty we shall continue to have visited upon us so long as the least flutter of our national pennon is of interest to lookers-on under other forms of government ; or so long as (to quote from Professor Bryce) "the social and political experiments of America, constantly cited in Europe as patterns and warnings, are hardly ever cited with knowledge of the facts, much less with comprehension of what they teach" ; he justly adds that "where premises are wrong inferences must be unsound." It would be interesting to know in how many tens of thousands of our homes the strictures of such essayists would be received with amused incredulity ; but, in their bearing upon the subject of this paper, even such unflattering assertions must be considered in relation to the germ of truth from which they have been elaborated for general application. And by a glance at some of the dominant characteristics of elementary society in our broad land we may arrive at a reasonable understanding of the facts.

The further away society is found from the fountain-heads of coercive custom, the more ardent among us is the worship of the girl fetich. Under the conditions of life in our regions toward the setting sun, and in the climate where myrtle and orange shade her bower, woman's charms are earlier developed and earlier spent ; "a rose, she lives the life of roses, a morning's space"—and must enjoy her fleeting hour, or none at all. In many of the mushroom communities of the frontier the laws of homiletic etiquette are framed in her honor with a simplicity as limpid as a mountain brook. A graduate of an Eastern university, recently taking up his abode in one of these Cities of the Plain, was, shortly after his arrival, waited upon by two of the town "beaux," who, with affluence of courtesy, requested him to inscribe his name upon their "Social List." Speaking for the cream of local aristocracy, they were the managers of an annual series of assembly balls, and explained that, in order to facilitate the general attendance of young ladies at these festivities, it was the rule to assign to every available young man a girl whom it was his duty to "call for in a hack" and escort to the place of revelry. That the propriety of the presence upon such occasions of an older woman had apparently never

entered into the calculations of that coterie is, it will be said, an illustration of a stage of progress in the custom-making groups of all primitive societies about which Walter Bagehot has quoted the captious phrase, "Manner gets regularly worse as you go from the East to the West : it is best in Asia, not so good in Europe, and altogether bad in the Western States of America."

But we should be loath to extol the sensual, superstitious "Mother of the Maids" of Oriental custom, at the expense of the chaperon who is a necessary part of good society and good form in Europe and America, or even at the expense of the sketchy personage who sometimes supplies the limited demand for such an article in the untutored circles at one of which my story allows a glimpse. And, judging not only from the infrequency there of the resounding scandals of more advanced communities, but from local observation of other facts, the social relation in even the least conventional of our American communities is proof that "altogether bad manner" may be an accompaniment and conservator of very good morals. Bagehot's citation, however, like many another clever generalizing phrase, has less of accuracy than point. We have in America fewer examples, perhaps, of that refinement in woman which comes of practice in all the arts of society in an ancient civilization ; but the general average of manner resulting from purity of mind and an intellectual training may be claimed to be higher here than in any other country of the world. And that is an end sought to be reached by institutions of republican equality.

To know her as she is, the actual American girl-sovereign to whose account we must put some of the strange charges laid at our door, it is necessary to journey far, and behold her majesty at home. She is in the human family as the cape jasmine in the kingdom of plants—able to survive transplantation, but rarely seen at full bloom and fragrance under alien skies. Fair and brilliant, she is as fearless as a nymph of Diana's train. Constantly in movement, her throne is often a saddle, her sceptre a riding crop. She rows, swims, shoots, dances with equal skill ; reads novels abundantly ; works not at all. As all men in her neighborhood are banded for her protection, she does not hesitate to go about alone, or with the cavalier of the hour ; choosing now this, now that member of her train to be the recipient of her smiles ; impartially delighted with them all. Innocent in thought

and unconscious of danger, without intention of being defiant, she does not know the meaning of the word conventionality. It was of such an one in the Southwest, where he had known her, that a young American discussing the type, when asked in an English drawing-room, "Can you trust your men in such a case?" said, with dignity, "We can trust our young girls, in such a case and always."

To follow from afar the movements of this elusive charmer in all parts of the territory where she prevails, one would have to make use of the Lick Telescope instead of a lorgnette. In the South she is generally lithe and tall, of a clear pallor in complexion that by lamplight warms into rose-bloom upon the cheeks, with dark orbs, languid during the sultry hours of day, at night and under the impulse of music, dancing, attentions of the other sex, shooting forth a thousand beams of merriment and mischief —a creature who can no more resist appealing to man's service, taxing man's gallantry, testing her own power over his helplessness, than a humming-bird can turn away from a flower-cup of sweets—a coquette born, whose most engaging aroma is exhaled between the ages of sixteen and twenty. The whole omnipotent sisterhood hold sway through their youth, insouciance, fearless audacity. These apparently-soulless witches excite among their followers a loyalty combining the fervor of Don Quixote with the indulgence that is all American. For a brief season they flit and gleam; they marry early, or not at all; and then comes the reverse of the medal. Who has not seen such deposed idols sitting wan and cheerless in a room-full of their pre-matrimonial worshippers? Without reason, save that of custom, the favorite has ceased to attract. She hangs on forlornly for a little while, and then her star sets, to rise again, perhaps, in the person of her daughter. Fortunate in being able to console herself with domestic joys, she makes an admirable wife and indefatigable housekeeper. It is on her first return to society after her nuptials that the former admirers of the butterfly, now crushed, contrive to let her know there is no longer zest in conversations made up of complimentary personalities and the exchange of infinitely small talk about theories of love and marriage. Like the *cigale* of the French fable, she has danced and sung her summer days away.

It were futile to attempt assembling statements about our restless people which may be expected to make a correct picture of

what will be a year ahead ; but, unless all signs fail, the movement is in full swing that will restore suppressed parents, console flouted matrons for long desuetude, and, it may be, even establish a bench of dowagers as a background for every provincial gathering. In the turmoil of inchoate settlements seeking how to push ahead to be neck to neck with the best lies a germ of national evolution. Our zeal for change, for continual improvement, is more conspicuous in petty matters than in great events. With the transfer or imitation of the column of "society intelligence," published in mammoth dailies of the East, now essential to any country journal that sings the progress of a local "Miss Mamie" or "Miss Susie" from "hop" to "drummers' picnic," we have learned to blush at nakedness of which we were hitherto unaware.

If there is any point a progressive American is sensitive about, it is his knowledge of how to do things as they are done by recognized authorities. For his simple needs, the chatter, the tyrannies, the petty exactions, of the ex-schoolgirl in society have been ample, until now. Accustomed to wreath the flowers of rhetoric around her shrine while scattering sugar-plums and roses in her path, he has wondered secretly at the taste men avow to-day for the companionship of ladies "on the shelf." He has all his life known the Sisters of Dorcas in alpaca gowns and sealskin jackets who form the church sewing-circle, and tries, and fails, to imagine them seated in V-cut robes *en train*, watching the progress of a protracted "german." But, difficult as conformity may be, he is heroically determined it never shall be said that in his part of the world they allow themselves to falter long in observance of the code of etiquette New York and Boston have definitely accepted. He is in his way as resolute and anxious about that as was the Marylander intent on general acquiescence in his claim to long descent, who, in a casual conversation at the club, unfolded to an astonished Englishman an elaborate pedigree which he drew from his pocket, having it always there, ready for any emergency.

Another lantern is now turned upon the path where are soon to be marshalled the hosts of home-keeping matrons who have so long and so bravely borne the burden of domesticity, uncheered from without. The leader of society in Newville, let us say, has become a diligent student of those strenuous little manuals which, like the peerages revised every year to date, our publishers

of to-day provide in such apparently useless numbers. From one of these springs of wisdom he sips, to ascertain "it is no longer the mode to give preference to a miss over a married woman, if the latter be of the dancing age"; "the most recent bride should be led out to conduct the cotillon, or to head the march to supper"; "a married lady may now receive the social calls of her gentlemen friends in the necessary absence of her husband, without subjecting herself to the criticism of the unkind." And, although the concession is rather cruelly limited by the text to the "dancing age" (whatever that may be), it is apparent that here the matron may read, at last, the decree of her emancipation.

The fiat having gone forth, what a flutter in provincial dovecots! Pastors, taking the alarm at this evolution from the peaceful joys of church fairs and "oyster box-lunches," embody in their sermons lurid mutterings against the decadence of true American womanhood. The question is discussed in women's debating clubs, is peppered with Liliputian arrows of sarcasm from the "Stroller" or "Lounger" without whom no country paper nowadays deems itself complete; is made the occasion of more clack of tongues than a canvass of rival politicians. The husbands of some, arming in defence of immemorial rights, sniff the battle from afar; others, less belligerent, are quite sure their spouses are too well satisfied at home to wish to break down the long-established barriers of usage. Girls, enthroned yesterday in secure sovereignty, still toss their heads at the idea that a mere Mrs. Anybody is to come from nursery and storeroom to take a place in their free ranks. They can't imagine what Mr. Jones or Mr. Robinson can find to say to a woman who has been married; and the real trouble of the situation is that Messrs. Jones and Robinson, although ambitious to conform to the requirements of metropolitan fashion, are secretly gnawed by the same distressing doubt. And then, while uncertainty and contention are at their height, arrives, in print, the glowing account of some Eastern ball or function of high society, from which the advocates of the new movement extract triumphantly the names of the leading belles, each, with a few "professional" exceptions, bearing the matron's prefix.

Little by little, led by the daring, the timid fall into line, and the old order changeth. Such equality of feminine awards in the social prize-giving seems, to some of the elders

who cherish Puritan traditions that have begun to loosen their iron grip upon America, to prelude little short of the speedy destruction of mankind. What, they argue, has any right-minded woman to do with junketings, after her day's work is laid aside? It is her place to be content, as generations of her predecessors have been content, with the society of the husband God and the law have provided for her perpetual edification. But, alas! many a time has wisdom cried aloud in the streets when no man has heeded her. The inexorable course of social growth deals with towns settled by the wandering offspring of the Pilgrim fathers as it is dealing in Scotland with those peopled by descendants of grimmer Presbyterians, who, it is now averred, dance the polka and drink champagne-cup at recurring festivities of their congregations—the dominie himself lending a foot, now and again, to the merry round! Verily, as comments the keen chronicler of these surprising incidents, "there has been nothing like it since the Flemish cities took up the Renaissance."

Returning to the long-settled centres of our States, we find that locality and custom afford our matron her revenge. Not only in all communities assuming to be abreast of modern conventionalism is her right to precedence established beyond the chance of heart-burnings; but, oftentimes, when a girl of our day makes, at her mother's elbow, her first courtesy to the world, the *mater pulchrior* is the rival most to be feared by the *filia pulchra*. A clever American woman touching her forties, who in the healthful ease of well-to-do modern life has kept her good looks, and has added to them a tact and facility in conversation born of long habit, is as attractive to the youngster strutting his first opinions as to the club-man who has no time to lose in explorations for new discoveries. One sees the daughter of some brilliant favorite of society leaving the hands of her masters and governess, shy, reserved, angular; too full of theories for the patience of her fellow-beings; inclined to mistake sarcasm for wit and to practise it at the expense of the first comer, or to turn her back on him outright; civil only when she chooses to be so; usually looking with cold gaze upon the passing show. What wonder that people approach her but for her mother's sake, or that, pushed along as if on rollers, she runs a little way to stop?

Another specimen of a débutante often forsaken for her elders

may be, and in truth most often is, charmingly fresh and dainty, with eyes, like those of old Réné of Provence in boyhood, "*à fleur de tête.*" The most jaded frequenter of crowded rooms is tempted to linger in her spring-like atmosphere. But, alas ! there is no object short of a roc's egg so rare as a fresh young girl who can control herself to pay attention to her interlocutor when in a throng. Her gaze is through him, not at him, and wanders incessantly ; her voice rises, pierces his tympanum in random answers or in trivial comments on the scene ; and soon her discouraged admirer drifts away in search of some haven of companionship where conversation may be found and enjoyed.

History affords many examples of women both elderly and dowdy, and neither beautiful nor rich, who continued to be sought by the cleverest men of their day until the coffin-lid was shut in the face of callers. Théodore de Banville depicts a wonderful comtesse who, with every appearance of youth and vivacity, danced, sang, and otherwise charmed a critical assemblage until she dropped dead after supper,—of old age,—leaving a young husband of twenty-five to mourn his loss. We hardly expect to see these things come to pass in our day. It would be too much to ask of even an American youth who aspires to be *fin de siècle*, to burn his candles before the goddess of ethereal sentiment. He is a creature who believes in what he sees, and demands an equivalent for every outlay. The married belle of our time and place is most apt to be she who can control and afford such good things of life as a desirable country-house or a yacht, dinners, balls, opera-boxes, four-in-hands, perhaps a Pullman car.

Sometimes an oldish woman who talks well, and gives a good cup of tea on Sunday afternoons, is not altogether overlooked by male beginners. And we have always with us the mature impressionist who scruples not to confess to every new acquaintance that her husband is a bore ; who, like the illustrations in the journals of society, is forever posing amid cushions, under palms and lamps, her taste in men culminating in the very young ones who bleat their emotions in her ear. The recently-married, or the wife of a few years, young, joyous and captivating, seen in company surrounded by her husband's friends, himself among them, is forever pleasing to all men. Whether at dance or horse show, opera or drum, the woman most conspicuously followed and fêted by the other sex is, in nine cases out of ten, in marriage-bonds.

None can pretend to vie with her, except the real reigning "beauties" who are almost always "about to" marry some one—even if they do not, in many seasons, accomplish that notable achievement. And in Washington, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Newport, or any other centre of our most conventional society, the explanation offered by men of the world for their wholesale surrender to appropriated loveliness is that, in this material age, one cannot afford to be devoted to any woman who may reasonably expect him to propose !

Forsaking the comedy aspect of our question, we may assert, as a proposition it is to be hoped none will gainsay, that modern society will continue to make broad the borders of its phylactery in proportion to the presence and participation in its reunions of the women who, with gracious tact and kind feeling, give variety and sparkle to conversation, illumine commonplace, and lightly dispense the benefits of such experience as may save their juniors from a world of mortifying retrospect.

And I do not like to let this article go into print without emphasizing the word "so seldom spoken for the larger class of home-bred, thoroughbred American women, as modestly retiring as they are intellectually eager, who are often jostled out of line before the public by the dashing sisterhood for whose shortcomings they are unjustly judged. Their wholesome and busy lives, so admirably full of effort in the direction of charity, of literature, of art, create an impression on their surroundings of the utmost importance to the social progress of our cultivated people.

Having thus handled my subject as a study of manners chiefly, I have not touched upon the graver aspect which may be suggested in a final paragraph. It is against reason that a young creature, before whom life opens as a clean scroll to receive her experimental sketches, should be weighed in the balance, as a maker of the habits of society, with the woman who in the depths of human emotion has learned wisdom, and has acquired in the married state and maternal relation a true knowledge of the motives and feelings that govern men and rule the world.

How America esteems her flower of maidenhood, a superficial glance reveals. What America owes to the energy, the tact, the inspiration of her wives and mothers, the wonderful progress of our commonwealth in the civilization we exhibit has already proved, and the future will continue to exemplify.

CONSTANCE CARY HARRISON.